19: Marshall M-6 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

usually heriditary, but he might have no son or nephew to succeed him. In that case the elders chose one of their own number as his successor. In so far as the villagers obeyed any authority at all, they obeyed him.[1] They generally observed his commands, although he possessed no well-defined jurisdiction. Ordinary quarrels, disputes relating to land, questions concerning the ownership of animals, etc., were referred to him for settlement. In most instances his court was a free and informal meeting of villagers and elders; and his decision, incorporating the opinion of the latter, would have the sanction of the group and be accepted by the parties concerned. He was the patriarch of the village, and often its high priest as well. A foray would not be undertaken without his consent. He was accorded the place of honor in the family living-room, which was usually the mat on the side facing eastward. If his rule became extremely displeasing to the villagers, they quietly went to a different site from that chosen by him at the time of the annual migration of the village. Thus, he would be left with only those who remained loyal to him, usually his relatives. The other families were now free to select a new chief or headman.

The chief levied no taxes. He tilled his field like his fellow villagers. He often received gifts of choice game, fruit, or grain; but these were largely a tribute to his personal popularity. If the village was about to engage in a raid, he might assess the people for the purpose of fitting out the expedition; but this would bring him no direct personal benefit, unless he was the organizer of it himself. The Karen had no caste of chiefs, no royal family, or even a privileged social class. Every member of the community shared alike in the ordinary tasks and the privations or prosperity of the seasons.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Wealth formed the only basis of social distinctions in the village life. But this made little difference in outward conditions. The land was free and belonged to the community. Every man was at liberty to take for his own use as many acres of hillside as he could fell. On this score there was little chance for inequality. However, the accumulation of money, which in the early days was represented by silver ingots, later by rupees, enabled one to purchase buffaloes or cattle or even an elephant, although the last was more often caught than bought. The ownership of a bronze drum brought more distinction to a family than that of seven elephants.

[1] [i.e. the chief -- analyst.]

But these forms of wealth brought with them only more or less prestige within the single stratum comprising the entire community.

There was little occasion for individual initiative among the Karen, on account of the important part played by communal activity amongst them. One could claim no particular credit for his deeds of blood on a raid. That belonged rather to the organizer and leader of the foray. One never set out on a journey or attempted any special work alone. In some sections it was the custom for the chief to beat a gong or blow a horn as the signal to go to the fields. Every one went at the signal. None would go without it. If a supply of fish was wanted, instead of an individual taking his or her rod and going alone to catch them, the whole village, or as many of its members as were free to do so, would join in a fishing expedition, first gathering the herbs to poison the water if the fish were to be taken in that way, or carrying along their funnel-shaped baskets with which to work the bottom of a shallow stream, or going prepared to resort to whatever other method they thought suitable to the time and place. Likewise hunting was commonly conducted as a drive for game in which all might participate, at least all the men; and a motley variety of implements was brought out for the purpose, including nets, crossbows, spears, knives, and perhaps an old rusty gun. Thus they hunted and fished together, as they often do still. Even those who failed to go were not left out in the division of the spoils, if they managed to be present at the proper time, and they usually did.

This communal sharing was so much the order of the day that personal rights were more or less disregarded. If a man got a few seeds and planted a garden near his house, he was fortunate, as is sometimes still the case in the hills, if he gathered half the crop he had planted. His neighbors, asking no leave, helped themselves generously without hesitation and perhaps without intending to steal.

While one's personal rights were thus disregarded, they were not entirely ignored. A man's field or "hkü" and his betel gardens were his own; and his paddy-bins, which may have been built in the jungle a mile from the village, were respected. If he marked with a bunch of grass a tree in which he had discovered a hive of wild bees, no one would attempt to rob it of its honey. Many of the Karen people are like children in their regard for the rights of other persons: they understand and abide by the law of established